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Moscow Feeds a Lap-Dog Foreign Press

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As next month's summit meeting in Geneva nears, the success of the Soviets' effort to convince Americans that they are peaceful, reasonable and, in general, "just like us" will depend in part on the analytical abilities of Western correspondents.

The Soviet Union is a difficult country to report on because it is not a country "like any other," but rather one based on an ideology that is a complete reinterpretation of given reality.

Every Soviet political position, whether it be that Korean airliner 007 was a "spy plane," that the invasion of Afghanistan was "fraternal help" or that the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative is a "threat to peace," is justified not in terms of empirical objectivity but on the basis of this ideology, which claims to be a "perfect science" and insists that "the truth" is whatever the Soviet leaders say it is.

The Soviet authorities understand that concessions to their view of reality weaken an adversary's ability to insist on the absolute value of anything. This is why the effort to induce the world to take their ideological lying literally is not just a question of prestige for the Soviet leaders but also a matter of fundamental political strategy.

Deafening Echo Chamber

Inside the Soviet Union, indoctrination depends on repetition. Once a specific propaganda position has been decided on, the Soviet media become a deafening echo chamber with official lies repeated in every newspaper, radio broadcast and television news program, as well as in every official statement or speech by a Soviet leader.

In the case of foreigners, however, the Soviet leaders must communicate through the Western media, which is why they attach so much importance to the manipulation of Western correspondents.

The Soviet authorities do not expect Western journalists to believe Soviet propaganda, but only to repeat it uncritically, without any effort to analyze what it means, so that, over time, the Soviet Union's ideological lying and officially sanctioned misuse of language, enhanced by the credibility of important American publications, begin to have the same numbing effect on Westerners as on Soviet citizens.

In his new book, "Reluctant Farewell," Andrew Nagorski, a former Moscow correspondent for Newsweek, analyzes the role of Moscow correspondents. He quotes an unidentified Associated Press correspondent as saying that 90% of stories filed from Moscow by the AP were simple paraphrases of articles from the Soviet newspapers and the Soviet news agency, Tass.

In my experience, the same figure applied to the output of other Western news organizations as well. Even the small percentage of stories that are not taken directly from the Soviet press are largely based on Soviet official information and therefore show the imprint of the Soviet Union's deluded view of reality.

Year after year, for example, Western correspondents who travel outside of Moscow under the auspices of the Soviet foreign ministry or the Soviet press agency, Novosti, are taken on the same factory tours, shown the same collective farms, and treated to the same programmed answers. The result is a spate of identical, meaningless stories, which reappear in the Western press at two- or three-year intervals.

The contrast between the reporting on real events from most countries and the sterile summaries of Pravda and Tass from the Soviet Union may lead many people to think that for Moscow correspondents, the mechanical repetition of Soviet propaganda is the only type of reporting that is possible. This is not true. There are many Soviet citizens who are ready to speak honestly to Western journalists. The problem is that Western journalists are often neither willing nor able to take advantage of the opportunities that exist.

American publications often serve, for many reasons, as transmission belts for Soviet disinformation. In the first place, faced with a country that requires an exceptional effort of analysis in order to be understood, Western publications traditionally send people who are completely unqualified. There were times during my tenure in Moscow when the percentage of American correspondents who could not speak Russian reached 90%. This meant that Andrei Sakharov, for example, was frequently interviewed for United Press International by the agency's Soviet translators, who were provided by the KGB. Time magazine sent its KGB-provided Soviet translator to interview Soviet citizens as an "American correspondent." It was common for non-Russian-speaking correspondents to interview their KGB-provided maids to get the reaction of the Soviet "man in the street."

Besides an inability to speak Russian, Western correspondents in Moscow often demonstrate the type of heedless careerism that makes them susceptible to Soviet manipulation.

Even though all Soviet political positions are stated in Pravda and no Soviet official can offer anything except what has been printed in Pravda, the Soviet authorities have achieved considerable success in inducing correspondents to bargain for

"high-level access" by demonstrating their conformity. The result is that Moscow correspondents, priding themselves on their "sources," begin to identify with them, as they would in the U.S., and frequently are ready to function as conduits for disinformation while treating those brave Soviet citizens who try to speak to them honestly with barely disguised contempt.

The attitude of many correspondents was well expressed by Nick Daniloff, the Moscow correspondent of U.S. News and World Report, in a recent interview in the Washington Journalism Review. Mr. Daniloff was quoted as saying: "I don't consort with dissidents. The magazine considers them a passing phenomenon of little interest. In a political sense, they don't have any influence—and they are perishing."

In fact, in the Soviet totalitarian context, a "dissident" is anyone ready to meet with a foreign correspondent without lying to him. And far from "perishing," there are hundreds of such people still at liberty in Moscow who are ready to take risks to help correspondents gather truthful information about the real state of Soviet society. Nonetheless, their bravery is of no use if it is not met with bravery on the part of correspondents who feel some responsibility to learn the truth about the nature of the country to which they are accredited. Unfortunately, this is almost never the case.

As the result of long experience, Soviet officials have been able to turn the manipulation of Western correspondents into something approaching a science.

The Soviets know the requirements of different types of correspondents. Wire-service reporters, for example, can be rewarded with information five minutes before their competition. A newspaper correspondent can be sure of having a Soviet official at dinner with his editor, thereby demonstrating his "access." Particularly cooperative journalists can be rewarded with on-the-record interviews in which officials repeat the contents of Pravda. The most cooperative correspondents can even hope for an interview with the Soviet leader, in which he repeats the contents of Pravda.

The favoritism costs the Soviet authorities nothing and it means nothing to the Western reading public, but it is a competitive advantage for which reporters are often willing to pay with their integrity.

At the same time, every Western journalist in the Soviet Union is aware that if he refuses to cooperate, he may be the target of provocations. He may not be confident that in the face of an accusation by the Soviet government of "hooliganism," "espionage" or "homosexuality," his

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newspaper would be ready to believe him and not the Soviets. Being honest means taking a risk.

No Relationship to Reality

As Americans prepare for the summit meeting, it is important to review not only our knowledge but also the sources of our knowledge. One of the reasons that Americans are often confused about the Soviet Union is that Soviet manipulation of diplomats, who senselessly limit their contacts, and Sovietologists, who depend on the Soviet authorities for their visas, has given rise to a conventional wisdom about the "reasonableness" of the Soviet Union that bears no relationship to reality.

Behind the facade of a country that desires nothing so much as peace and "good relations" with the West is an aggressive police state waiting to be discovered. This is why it is essential that before making policy decisions based on our impressions of the Soviet Union's intentions, we bear in mind that the Soviet system is organized to create illusions and begin to give the most serious thought to the entire process through which our impressions were formed.

Mr. Satter, a Journal special correspondent living in Paris, reported from Moscow for the Financial Times from 1976 to 1982. This is based on his testimony earlier this year to the International Sakharov Hearings in London.